

Whitefish Transportation Plan Urban Corridor Study of US 93 Resource Agency Workshop Meeting Summary

Introduction

A Resource Agency Workshop was held on Thursday, May 24th in Conference Room A at MDT's Rail, Transit, and Planning Office at 2550 Prospect Avenue in Helena. The meeting took place between 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. and was attended by the following persons:

Sheila Ludlow	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Jean Riley	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Carl James	Federal Highway Administration
Bob Burkhardt	Federal Highway Administration
Steve Potts	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
Jeff Key	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Dan Norderud	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Scott Randall	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)

Other Agency Representatives Invited

Scott Jackson	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Allan Stienle	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE)
Jeff Ryan	Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
Robert Ray	Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
Julie Dalsaglio	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
Jim Satterfield	Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)
Glenn Phillips	Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)
Steve Knapp	Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)
Mark Baumler	Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)

In an effort to provide project information to invited agency representatives who did not attend the workshop, the PowerPoint presentation used for the workshop, and these meeting minutes, have been posted on the project website.

All invited agency representatives were provided with an agenda and other project information prior to the workshop to support and foster discussion during the meeting.

Workshop Purpose

The purposes of this workshop were to: 1) introduce the Consultant Team to agency representatives; 2) provide an overview of the community-wide Transportation Plan and US 93 Urban Corridor Study projects; 3) compare and contrast the corridor planning and NEPA processes;

4) discuss existing conditions within the US 93 corridor and identify known corridor resource issues and concerns; and 5) solicit input from agency representatives on environmental resources along and affected by the highway corridor through Whitefish and possible regulatory concerns.

Workshop Summary

Overview of the Whitefish Projects

Jeff Key began the workshop by providing an overview of the Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study projects. He noted there are two (2) distinct projects underway in Whitefish—the Whitefish Transportation Plan and an Urban Corridor Study focused on US 93 within the City. The projects are cooperative efforts funded by MDT and the City of Whitefish that should be completed near the end of 2007.

Mr. Key explained that no comprehensive Transportation Study has been undertaken to date within the City and surrounding area and the time is right for such a study due to the land use changes and growth occurring in the community. The Transportation Plan will inventory and analyze the existing transportation system; forecast future development patterns and travel demands; and evaluate the forecasts to determine needed transportation improvements in the study area.

He stated that design work for MDT's "Whitefish Urban" and "Whitefish West" projects on US 93 began in 2005. These projects were developed based on the Preferred Alternative for US 93 outlined in the US Highway 93—Somers to Whitefish Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD). As part of the work for these projects, a Re-Evaluation of the findings and conclusions in the FEIS/ROD as they relate to the Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West project areas is underway. The preliminary results of this effort suggest unanticipated growth has changed traffic volumes and travel patterns within the community. Traffic analysis work also showed the Preferred Alternative for the Whitefish Urban project would not function as indicated in the FEIS/ROD. As a result, MDT and FHWA determined that additional studies and analyses of feasible alternatives are needed for US 93 through Whitefish and resulted in a decision to do a corridor study to take a fresh look at options for the US 93 corridor through Whitefish.

Mr. Key stressed that the Corridor Study will be developed within the context of and concurrent with the Whitefish Transportation Plan. This approach allows for a focused look at US 93 through Whitefish based on the consideration of existing and planned land use changes and a detailed evaluation of community-wide transportation needs and desires. He emphasized that these new planning efforts will be sensitive to prior community input and projects like: previous "subarea" transportation studies; the Somers to Whitefish FEIS/ROD; the recently adopted Downtown Business District Master Plan; and the community's current Growth Policy Update project.

The Corridor Study is not being completed in conjunction with a NEPA document but it will be developed and documented in a manner consistent with NEPA. Recommendations and appropriate supporting information from the Corridor Study will be forwarded into a future NEPA process.

Corridor Planning and NEPA

Dan Norderud presented a series of PowerPoint slides that discussed Corridor Planning and how it relates to the NEPA process. The discussion identified elements of corridor studies and the potential benefits offered by undertaking corridor planning: reducing the cost of the environmental review process; speeding up project delivery time; and providing for early and ongoing involvement of agencies and the public. Mr. Norderud compared and contrasted Corridor Planning and the NEPA process and discussed how corridor planning can be used to “inform” the NEPA process through the identification of issues and system deficiencies, the development and screening of alternatives, and impact analyses. He explained that both processes have similar goals:

- Make decisions in the best overall interest of the community through a collaborative process; and
- Bring environmental considerations into agency planning and action.

Roles and Responsibilities and Public Involvement Activities

Jeff Key identified all parties involved in the projects and remarked that the City of Whitefish appears to be very engaged in the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study. The Consultant Team is working with a Project Oversight Committee composed of members from MDT, FHWA, and the City of Whitefish. Conference calls among members of the committee are held every other week. A Citizens Advisory Committee composed of various stakeholders in Whitefish has also been formed as a sounding board for the projects.

Public involvement activities planned for the projects include four meetings with the Citizens Advisory Committee, four public information meetings, a presentation and a formal hearing for the Transportation Plan before the Whitefish City Council, and informal community meetings. The first public informational meeting and meetings with the Citizens Advisory Committee and the City Council were held in mid-April.

Mr. Key explained that various public outreach efforts are underway and planned including project newsletters (with distribution to over 5,000 community residents), an online travel preference survey, and a project website.

Existing Conditions Summary

Mr. Key then presented an overview of the US 93 corridor and conditions within the community that have changed since the time of the Somers to Whitefish FEIS/ROD. He provided information about the functional classification of US 93, lane configurations and traffic controls, estimated traffic volumes, and land uses within the US 93 corridor. It was pointed out that large commercial motor vehicles accounted for 8-13% of traffic within the corridor at time of the Final EIS and that traffic analyses have generally verified that the percentage of large trucks in the traffic stream remains an issue.

Mr. Key then identified notable changed conditions within the community and US 93 corridor including information documenting the notable growth, development, and land use changes within the Whitefish area. The information illustrated rapid growth rates and pointed out that migration of out-of-state residents into the area is a significant factor in this growth. Mr. Key advised the group that the City's new Growth Policy assumes controlled growth would occur within the community and forecasted the addition of about 2,400 new dwelling units over the next 12 years (the planning horizon for the Growth Policy). He also highlighted key objectives of the Downtown Business Master Plan and described recommendations of the plan that could influence the design of the US 93 corridor.

Mr. Key concluded by indicating that issues like livability issues and managing growth, alternate transportation modes (particularly pedestrian and bicycle facilities), aesthetics, environmental protection, and preserving the community's character and "small town" feel are highly important to Whitefish residents based on comments heard to date and previous planning efforts.

Dan Norderud then presented information about environmental resources present within the US 93 corridor including: air quality; surface waters/water quality/floodplains; threatened and endangered species; wetlands; general wildlife and fisheries; cultural resources; and hazardous materials. An aerial photo overlain with information about floodplains, wetlands, cultural resource sites, and hazardous materials sites was presented. The information presented was compiled from: previous resource documents prepared for the Somers to Whitefish FEIS; studies conducted in 2005 and 2006 that updated resource information for the Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West project areas; and new information generated for an environmental scan associated with the corridor study. Mr. Norderud explained that the environmental scan will be used to help identify fatal flaws, differences in potential impacts, and procedural requirements associated with alternatives considered for US 93.

Next Steps

Mr. Key concluded the workshop presentation by summarizing work in progress and briefly outlining upcoming activities for the projects. He indicated that only one agency workshop has been planned but agencies will be kept apprised of progress on the projects.

Comments/Discussion

Jeff Key indicated during his presentation that there are some differences regarding the City's managed growth scenario for the community and growth assumptions made for traffic analyses done for the Whitefish Urban project. Bob Burkhardt of FHWA asked if it would be misleading to present two differing growth scenarios in the traffic modeling for the transportation plan. Jeff responded that a decision regarding the most appropriate growth scenario has not yet been made; however, he felt that the scenario representing the worst case for traffic should be used to help identify necessary system improvements.

Steve Potts indicated that based on the materials presented at the workshop, he believed the issues of interest to EPA are known and will be addressed in the corridor planning effort.

There was general discussion among the group about PM-2.5 non-attainment areas since monitoring has shown particulate levels in Whitefish over the 2002-2005 period approached the recently revised 24-hr average standard for PM-2.5. Steve Potts indicated Libby was the only PM-2.5 non-attainment area in Montana and identified Betsy Wahl as an EPA staff member that can provide further information about PM-2.5 non-attainment status.

The group also discussed how recommendations from the corridor study may be incorporated into NEPA documents and that corridor planning may help identify less costly and phased approaches to resolving transportation issues. This may enable some projects to be more easily advanced through the environmental review process.

Jean Riley also suggested that agencies be provided with advance copies of the corridor study. This would keep agencies up to date on the direction of the project and could help identify notable issues or concerns early in the process.

Jean Riley also asked about if the City's proposed Growth Policy could push growth outside Whitefish's jurisdictional area. Jeff Key indicated that the Growth Policy has not yet been adopted and some resistance to a limited growth idea has been heard. He pointed out that if growth shifts beyond the jurisdictional area, the effect may not be too significant on US 93 since residents still have to use the roadway for travel within and through the community.

Follow-Up Actions

Scott Jackson of the USFWS was unable to attend the workshop due to prior commitments. Scott requested a meeting to be set on a different date to discuss the Whitefish projects and obtain input on potential Threatened/Endangered species issues. MDT will contact Scott and set up a meeting.

The workshop concluded at 3:00 p.m.

Whitefish Transportation Plan Urban Corridor Study of US 93 May 30, 2007 Coordination Meeting with the USFWS

A meeting with Scott Jackson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was held on Wednesday, May 30th in Conference Room B at MDT's Rail, Transit, and Planning Office at 2550 Prospect Avenue in Helena. The meeting was arranged because Scott Jackson was unable to attend the Resource Agency Workshop held on May 24, 2007. Scott was provided with a copy of the slides from the PowerPoint presentation made at the Agency Workshop.

The meeting took place from 8:30 to 10:00 a.m. and was attended by the following persons:

Sheila Ludlow
Jean Riley
Dan Norderud

MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)

The purposes of this meeting were to provide an overview of the community-wide Transportation Plan and US 93 Urban Corridor Study projects and solicit input from the USFWS on environmental resources along and affected by the highway corridor through Whitefish and possible regulatory concerns.

Meeting Summary

Dan Norderud began with a brief overview of the Whitefish Transportation Plan and Corridor Study. He summarized MDT's efforts to develop the "Whitefish Urban" and "Whitefish West" projects—developed based on the Preferred Alternative identified in the US Highway 93—Somers to Whitefish Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) completed in 1994. Dan pointed out that work done for these projects, suggests unanticipated growth has changed traffic volumes and travel patterns within the community. Traffic analysis work also showed the Preferred Alternative (a one-way couplet design) for the Whitefish Urban project would not function as indicated in the FEIS/ROD.

Mr. Norderud indicated MDT and FHWA determined that additional studies and analyses of feasible alternatives for US 93 through Whitefish were needed. MDT and the City of Whitefish agreed to prepare a community-wide Transportation Plan and review design options for US 93 in Whitefish. This approach will allow for a focused look at the US 93 corridor considering existing land uses and planned land use changes; community-wide transportation needs and desires; and local planning efforts like the recently adopted Downtown Business District Master Plan and the ongoing Growth Policy Update project. Dan stated that recommendations and appropriate supporting information from the Corridor Study will be forwarded into a future NEPA process.

The discussion then focused on threatened and endangered species. Scott related that the following endangered, threatened, proposed, and candidate species are listed for Flathead County:

- Canada lynx – Listed Threatened with Designated Critical Habitat
- Gray wolf – Listed Endangered
- Grizzly bear – Listed Threatened
- Bald eagle – Listed Threatened
- Bull trout – Listed Threatened with Designated Critical Habitat
- Spalding's Campion – Listed Threatened

Habitat availability, species distribution, the potential impacts associated with improving US Highway 93, and measures to minimize impacts to potentially affected species were discussed among those attending the meeting. These discussions are summarized below.

Bull Trout. Scott stated that Whitefish Lake and tributaries above the lake have been designated as critical habitat for bull trout. The Whitefish River, which flows southeasterly from Whitefish Lake to join the Stillwater River, is within bull trout range but does not provide high quality habitat for the species. He pointed out that water quality and temperature are the principal reasons for the habitat limitations in the river.

Scott indicated that he had previously discussed the reconstruction of US 93 through with biological resources consultants assisting with the Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West projects. He was aware of the need to cross the Whitefish River at several locations. Jean Riley pointed out that the Preferred Alternative in the FEIS/ROD called for a new bridge across the river at 7th Street linking Spokane and Baker Avenues. Scott noted that USFWS has not had to consider many “new” bridges across bull trout waters in recent years. He said building a new bridge presents a concern but would not be a “deal stopper” given the quality of habitat being crossed in Whitefish.

Scott recommended that design efforts should attempt to minimize impacts and encroachment on the Whitefish River through measures like minimizing the number of piers and adequately accommodating flood flows. He also wondered if consideration could be given to replacing the existing culverts with a bridge where Spokane Avenue crosses the river in the southern portion of the corridor. Dan mentioned that a bridge on Spokane Avenue at the identified crossing was being discussed for the Whitefish Urban project. He also said the community had an interest in developing a pedestrian/bicycle trail along the river and some type of crossing under the highway would be desirable at this location.

Bald Eagles. Scott indicated that bald eagles could potentially be found foraging along the Whitefish River. He was not aware of any bald eagle nests in the immediate Whitefish area and that information on nesting can be obtained through a request to the Natural Heritage Program. Scott said that bald eagles are becoming more frequent in urban areas and there are some instances of bald eagle nests being established in urban areas. Limitations on construction activities could be possible if a nest were. In general, Scott felt that the same type of minimization measures discussed for bull trout would generally benefit foraging eagles and other aquatic species.

Grizzly Bears. Scott provided a map showing the boundaries of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the distribution of grizzly bears in 2002. The species distribution map showed that grizzly bears could occur in Whitefish. He felt there are no notable issues related to grizzly bears if US 93 improvements occur along the existing urban corridor. There could be some concern if work for the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study suggest the development of a new bypass route through a more rural area of the community. The principal issue related for grizzly bears for the area was ensuring “good housekeeping” practices and sanitation during construction.

Canada Lynx and Gray Wolf. Scott does not there are any issues associated with these species within the US 93 Corridor or the remainder of the study area for the Transportation Plan. The nearest critical habitat for Canada lynx is in Glacier National Park.

Spalding’s Campion. Scott indicated the project does not pose a concern for this threatened plant species since suitable habitat for the species does not occur in the immediate Whitefish area.

Follow-Up Actions

Jean Riley suggested that RPA contact Montana FWP staff in the Whitefish area for their input on wildlife/fisheries resources and relevant issues. RPA will contact Tim Their, Mark Delaray, and Tim Manley and document their comments.

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